

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord  
January 10, 2016

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Our Lord Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins, six months apart in age. There must have been family gatherings. The Bible never tells us. But the great painters of fine art wish to think so. They have drawn beautiful portraits of these two boys (often with their mothers) at various stages in their young lives. But John's parents were very old when he was born, and things changed when they died. John went off into the desert of Judaea to live the life of a solitary ascetic. People eventually came from all over the nation to hear John preach.

John the Baptist developed the practice of using water from the Jordan River for baptism. This was a cleansing sign of a changed heart and life. John baptized those who heard him preach about the necessity of repentance and amendment of life and then made their confession.

One day towards the end of John's busy ministry Jesus closed up the carpenter's shop in Nazareth and left town. It was a sad day for His mother Mary (probably a widow by then) and she walked her Son to the edge of town. After goodbyes and a last wave from Him down to road, she went home alone.

Two days later, and in its breathtakingly understated way, the Gospel tells us Almighty God stood in a queue of those waiting to see John the Baptist! Jesus presented Himself as a candidate for baptism and made His confession. We do not know what Jesus confessed, but how could it be anything but a *true* confession showing His interior life? What we *do* know is that John recoiled from the revealed holiness. John said, "I need to be baptized by You."

The complete picture is important. But don't put it in stained glass. Think of people waiting for a bus on Boylston Street. Here is Jesus, the Sinless One, asking for the baptism of repentance. Standing amid all sorts of fallen men and women: robbers, adulterers, prostitutes, soldiers who had raped and pillaged, hard-hearted Pharisees. The people waiting for the bus on Boylston Street are probably a better lot. But here in the same queue was the Immaculate Son of God, "numbered among the transgressors" as Isaiah had foretold long ago. For Jesus to be there is a great sign of God's merciful love for penitents. Keep that image in mind: Jesus

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standing in line at the Jordan. Our Blessed Lord is very close to us when we kneel for confession sorrowing for our sins.

The confessional in St Theresa's Church is arranged in such a way both the priest and penitent can look at a framed copy of Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*. The wayward son has returned and is kneeling before his forgiving father. It's a parable the Lord has told. We have it there to provide comfort. But Jesus Himself at the Jordan is an even more powerful sign of God's merciful love for penitents. Many artists have portrayed Jesus *in the water* with John the Baptist. But Jesus *waiting in line* is what we need to cherish. Here is the Holy God, standing, with fallen human nature, to receive the baptism of repentance.

The Lord did not accept John the Baptist's recoiling from the Presence of Holiness, and the thought of baptizing God's Own Son. The Gospel gives us that part of the conversation as well. Jesus said, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Let that be our motto as well. *It is fitting* for you and me to begin the work of fulfilling all righteousness, by means of the grace Jesus has provided by His Own humility. Our Lord is waiting to communicate His righteousness to our souls. The Gospel at Mass lays out everything in order. The first step for us is repentance for sin. Then God will proclaim us His blessed children (by adoption and grace) in whom He is well pleased. And the Holy Ghost will come upon us in greater measure.

Because of what Jesus has done: His Birth, His Baptism, above all His Passion and Death, and His whole Incarnate Life crowned by His Resurrection and Ascension, it is indeed fitting for us to aim at fulfilling all righteousness. *That is precisely why He came to us.*